

A plan for climate change must include the Arctic

The Toronto Star

September 9, 2019 Monday

Copyright 2019 Toronto Star Newspapers Limited

Section: OPINION; Pg. A11

Length: 707 words

Byline: Irvin Studin Contributor Irvin Studin is president of the Institute for 21st Century Questions and editor-in-chief and publisher of Global Brief Magazine.

Body

Canada's climate change debate is among all the major parties is woefully inadequate.

With varying degrees of interest or disinterest, the dominant logic of Canadian climate action today focuses on changing the behaviour and, before long, industrial structure of the major cities that line the U.S. border.

All of this is purportedly in the service of Canada either meeting specific carbon emissions targets (international or self-imposed), "doing its part" in a global decarbonization push or, in the most optimistic scenario, serving as an example of wholesale societal "green" transformation that will mobilize the entire world.

Let me be clear, for time is of the essence: No Canadian climate change plan, however sincere or ambitious, can be taken seriously unless it deals head-on, at centre stage, with the Canadian Arctic and North. Full stop.

The Canadian Arctic is no abstraction.

Far more than Toronto, Montreal and Calgary, the rapid melting of northern permafrost and circumpolar sea ice means that a territory as large as the entire European Union - Canada's three Northern territories combined - has now become the epicentre of our country's strategic, economic, demographic and environmental future.

Nothing we or other countries do, however dramatic, will reverse the ice-melt in the North. Let us reckon with this basic fact. Self-flagellation among well-intentioned Torontonians or Vancouverites about carbon purity is, as such, not only fruitless in changing climatic outcomes but also risks blinding our country, unforgivably, to the huge stakes in the upper 40 per cent of our territory.

The first set of stakes in the North concern brutal strategy. With only 115,000 people spread across the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, Canada is at great risk of having other major Arctic or Arctic-interested states impose their terms on us.

Such imposition could be regulatory in the first instance, as suggested by the Shipping and Environmental Arctic Leadership Act now before the U.S. Congress. It could also be military before long. Annexation isn't part of the Arctic vernacular in the public sphere today, but a second Trump presidency or domestic instability in Russia could foretell a variety of U.S. or Russian annexation scenarios in the Arctic. And they could happen fast.

Most relevantly, the future of environmental and climatic governance in the Arctic space is up for grabs. Who will set its terms? Have we as a country anything to say here?

For now, no. But if we did, then Canada could be driving the overall terms for an international Arctic space that covers not only our own colossal North, but also the four massive continents that collide in the Arctic space:

A plan for climate change must include the Arctic

continental North America, Europe, Russia and Eurasia and, of course, China and the rising Asian continent. In short, Canadian term-setting in the Arctic would be tantamount to Canadian term-setting for most of the world.

At a historic national minisummit in Toronto on the Arctic this past summer, outgoing NWT Premier Bob McLeod noted that cities like Yellowknife and Whitehorse are closer by air and sea to major foreign capitals and markets like Beijing, Moscow and leading European centres than are the leading cities of Canada's south. By my calculation, if we include the North's proximity to Alaska and major North American cities, this means that Canada's Arctic is physically closer to markets of more than two billion people - six times larger than the U.S. market alone.

If we could imagine Yellowknife or Whitehorse becoming a "Singapore of the Arctic," Canada's Arctic would not only become a global economic and transportation hub, but also the intellectual centre driving the international governance of the overall Arctic theatre this century - critically, in environmental and climatic terms.

A Canadian Singapore in the North, at the heart of a future "Arctic League" of countries, could be built within a decade. This would require, surely, a huge national effort. But this would also, in the end, serve to prove that on climate, just as in strategy, commerce, science and Indigenous questions, Canada is a serious country that means to drive serious results in matters demanding the highest national and international seriousness.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: CLIMATE ACTION (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); EMISSIONS (78%); SOCIETY, SOCIAL ASSISTANCE & LIFESTYLE (75%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (74%); GREENHOUSE GASES (73%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (72%); US CONGRESS (72%); AIR QUALITY REGULATION (71%); EUROPEAN UNION (67%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%)

Organization: EUROPEAN UNION (55%)

Industry: PROPERTY ANNEXATIONS (89%); EMISSIONS (78%)

Geographic: TORONTO, ON, CANADA (90%); VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA (79%); CALGARY, AB, CANADA (59%); MONTREAL, QC, CANADA (59%); NORTHWEST TERRITORIES, CANADA (79%); NUNAVUT, CANADA (79%); ALBERTA, CANADA (74%); ONTARIO, CANADA (74%); QUEBEC, CANADA (59%); YUKON TERRITORY, CANADA (59%); ARCTIC (99%); CANADA (97%); ASIA (92%); EUROPE (92%); NORTH AMERICA (92%); UNITED STATES (92%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (90%); EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES (70%)

Load-Date: September 9, 2019